

BILINGUALISM AND COMMON SENSE IN BUSINESS

Notes for a speech by Keith Spicer,
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Some two years ago, in a speech to the French Chamber of Commerce in Canada in Montreal, I was foolhardy and pompous enough to end up my remarks by saying: "as soon as an opportunity comes, I hope to have the frankness to say to your English-speaking colleagues in Toronto that for them too the Official Languages Act can prove, in private as well as Government business, a useful, humane and, above all, realistic charter."

Well, the Canadian Club of Toronto has called this bilingual bluff. And I'm stuck with a near-politician's nightmare: being forced to say the same thing, or almost, in two ^{very different} parts of the country.

It was a bit ironic that I should tell your Montreal colleagues that in matters of business, bilingualism was something to be reckoned with. For you all know that French-speaking entrepreneurs in Canada long ago, if not always, accepted bilingualism as an integral part of their commercial operations. In saying so, I am not implying that English-speaking businessmen invariably ignore the obligations laid

on their companies' operations by the very nature of our country. I know that many of the companies represented in this room could have taught lots of things to Ottawa about bilingualism a long time before Parliament passed the Official Languages Act, and still could. But in the main, I think it fair to suggest that many national firms headquartered in Toronto continue to look on the French language with something less than capitalist ecstasy.

Today, I'd like to put a low-key case for commonsense bilingualism in business. All of this I would put under that delightful old slogan: "The customer is always (let's say usually) right." First, a reminder of a few simple ideas underlying the Official Languages Act; then some suggestions on how businessmen outside Quebec might use these ideas as pointers to make bilingualism better their balance-sheets -- not to mention, serve their country.

1. The Official Languages Act:

Let us look first at the Official Languages Act and try to draw some ideas from it on bilingualism in 1975.

Semantically, bilingualism means "two languages". In the case of an individual, it's thus the ability to express oneself in two languages, whereas for a State it means recognizing the existence of two important linguistic groups. In Canada, until quite recently, bilingualism

denoted essentially the ability of a certain number of Canadians -- in very great majority French-speaking-- to express themselves in English and French. The notion of a Canada, as a bilingual State, belonged much more in the realm of theory than in that of tested practice. Needless to say, right now we are doing what we can to make theory and practice coincide.

Since the work of the B. & B. Commission, certain noble plans have been toned down and gradually replaced by a "respectable" realism. The idea of a Canada in which everyone would speak two languages seems little by little to be fading away. In the place of this high ideal but not contradicting it, we are making more room for an institutional bilingualism resting on a fundamental fact of Canadian reality: most Canadians, whether French- or English-speaking, are unilingual; and nothing indicates, in spite of notable but isolated progress in Canada's elementary schools, that this situation will change in the near future. According to the 1971 Census, 85% of Canada's population is unilingual, whether English or French.

Faced with such a situation, the choice before the legislators who conceived the Official Languages Act was the following: either to perpetuate the myth of a Canada in

which everyone would speak two languages, or look for a solution which would quite simply take into account the country's population and language facts. This last solution was adopted, thereby shifting the burden of bilingualism from the individual to the State.

In Book I of its final report, the B. & B. Commission stated:

"A bilingual country is not one where all the inhabitants necessarily have to speak two languages; rather it is a country where the principal public and private institutions must provide services in two languages to citizens, the vast majority of whom may very well be unilingual."

This quotation might be placed as a preface to the Official Languages Act, for it reflects perfectly the spirit in which the Act was conceived and must be understood. You will have noted that the Commission spoke of public and private institutions, therefore implying that institutional bilingualism was not to be a characteristic solely of government institutions.

The Official Languages Act illustrates this distinction between individual and institutional bilingualism by making institutional bilingualism the cornerstone of federal language policies. No doubt a certain number of federal public servants must be or will have to be individually bilingual. Last November, the President of the Treasury Board announced that about

54,000 positions in the federal public service -- of which 53% already had a bilingual incumbent -- had been identified as requiring the knowledge of both the English and the French languages. This represents roughly 19% of the some 282,000 positions in the federal public service that were the object of a linguistic review. However high this figure may seem, it still represents less than a fifth of all positions: it's obvious that, across the country, official bilingualism will not affect more than a relatively very limited number of Canada's total work force of over 9 million people. Furthermore, any Canadian citizen, as a private individual, has and will have always the right to become bilingual, even if in too many cases the individual's openmindedness is not matched by concrete opportunities for learning the second language. But one must point out (and it can never be repeated enough) that the purpose of the Official Languages Act is not to force the great majority of Canadians to speak two languages -- a pity, in a sense, since bilinguals, like blonds, really can have more fun; the Act aims ^{merely} to ensure that the institutions of the federal State serve their publics in the two official languages, at each citizen's choice.

2. The Official Languages Act and the Business World

Thus, the Official Languages Act proclaims the equality of status, rights, and privileges of English and French as to their use in all the institutions of the Parliament and Government of Canada. However, its field of application

covers only areas of federal jurisdiction and in no way affects provincial or municipal jurisdictions or the whole vast sector of private enterprise. For example, the Act lays upon the major commercial companies of the State, such as the CN and Air Canada, obligations which do not fall upon their competitors of the private sector.

Strictly from a budgetary point of view, these State enterprises might well maintain that they find themselves at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their competitors; for the bilingualism laid upon them can be measured in cash as an increase in operating expenses. Obviously this argument does not stand up to analysis as soon as one admits that these companies are not merely "money makers": they fulfill an indispensable social role, and it is in this light that bilingualism finds its first justification. On this point, I take pleasure in quoting the President and Chief Executive Officer of CN. In a speech delivered recently in Toronto, Dr. Bandeen said: "On the corporate level, as a federal Crown corporation engaged in providing such unifying services as transportation and telecommunications in all parts of Canada, we have a special responsibility to ensure that we reflect the bicultural nature of our nation... We [...] have to look upon bilingualism as a fact of Canadian life, and something that has to be taken into account in our plans..."

Moreover, in our meetings with leaders of our great State enterprises, we have all agreed that bilingualism, even while requiring extra expenditures, did not constitute a disadvantage, but a distinct competitive advantage vis-à-vis their 7 million French-speaking potential customers.

The social role of bilingualism should not, I think, escape the private sector, even if the private sector sometimes tends to wish that it were so. The private sector, whether one likes it or not, fits into a political, social and cultural context. Even if it is not obliged by law to do so, private business has a moral-- indeed realistic-- obligation to adapt to the various factors of its environment. In Canada, bilingualism is one of these environmental factors, and it should not be up only to State enterprises to recognize it and to make it a reality.

This much said, I gladly recognize the worthy efforts of several major cross-Canada companies to integrate bilingualism with the normal process of their operations. After all, it was on a Corn Flakes box as a kid in Toronto that I myself discovered the existence of two languages in Canada. But it's a long way from bilingualism on boxes of Corn Flakes or soap to bilingualism achieved on the scale of the entire private cross-Canada sector.

That's why it seems to me that the Official Languages Act, with its great flexibility, might usefully serve as a model for the private sector. I am not proposing that large private companies, even those holding a federal charter, should come under the Official Languages Act.

I am simply suggesting that, for both commercial and social reasons, the Act's principles might prove of some inspiration to companies whose operations cover all of Canada or bilingual areas.

What are these principles of the Act which might wisely be put to use by the private sector?

First there is the basic statement of the equality of English and French as Canada's official languages. Almost all major national companies recognize it, even though to differing degrees. In their Quebec operations, these companies seem to offer, as a general rule, an adequate service to the French-speaking population. But as soon as one moves beyond Quebec, service in French diminishes or disappears, as though in the companies' mind Canada, as a bilingual State, began and ended at the Quebec border. English speakers in Quebec generally enjoy the whole range of these companies' services in their own language. But for reasons I find difficult to understand, these praiseworthy efforts for English-speaking Quebecers come into play far less in favour of French speakers when one leaves Quebec.

Obviously I do not propose that any particular company offer its services in the two official languages in Prince George, B.C. or in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. We have to find a middle way, and here again the Act can be quite useful.

To the principle of equal status for both languages are added others affecting the travelling public, so-called "significant demand", and bilingual districts.

Let's first take the case of the travelling public. Section 10 of the Act obliges federal agencies to serve the travelling public everywhere in both languages, practically without restriction. I think that private companies operating throughout Canada and whose main activity is supplying services to the travelling public might usefully follow this example -- both for their own sake (in shafting their competition) and for the benefit of their client. Whether we are considering inter-city buses, trains, airplanes, boats, hotels or telecommunications, the public to which all these services are provided cannot be clearly or constantly identified with a given region. In fact, the travelling public transcends local or regional boundaries and can only be viewed on a national scale. At least one major Toronto hotel has understood this from the beginning, at least in its visual presentation, and whenever I stay there (partly for the bilingualism, partly for the water beds), I cannot help but take pride in the fact that my hometown, despite widespread belief to the contrary, is not totally immune to bilingualism.

I am always surprised when I cross the Canadian border into Vermont, or when I see pictures of beaches in Maine, to see numerous bilingual signs welcoming Canada's French-speaking tourists. I am surprised even moreso because many of my English-speaking countrymen (who, however, are rather proud of their business sense) do not understand that, questions of courtesy aside, bilingualism and business can go together. The Americans can teach us many things; but it should hurt our self-respect a little to think that we have to visit them to learn how to put to intelligent use our own national heritage.

Of course bilingualism affects more than the travelling public. In other cases the Official Languages Act sets out the notions of significant demand and of bilingual districts.

The notion of significant demand is hard to measure. What constitutes significant demand? It's up to the institution or company to decide, but my colleagues and I follow the principle of giving it the broadest possible interpretation. Thus I think it reasonable that a telephone company take for granted that a significant demand exists all the time, at least at its main switchboards, even if this demand, up till now, was felt rarely or perhaps not at all. But such a company need not wait for this demand to materialize: it ought to anticipate, and advertise

and offer bilingual services. In Government bilingualism we are finding every day that supply "creates" demand. I realize that this idea of "significant demand" remains imprecise and is certainly not applicable everywhere. Lacking a scientifically calculated mathematical formula, I can only commend to you the normal standards which any enlightened administrator might use to weigh demand: these standards, it seems to me, are common sense, generosity and imagination.

A recently discovered made-in-Canada device for assessing the language distribution of the Canadian population with more than these poetic values is ~~through the use of~~ the geocoding system. For a minimal fee, Statistics Canada will supply a customer with a computer print-out of the social, cultural and economic characteristics of the population in a given area. The information can cover a wide area, such as a whole city, or a very small one, like a street. This information can help companies operating on a smaller scale, either regionally or locally, to pinpoint demand with considerable precision.

Bilingual districts are also a way of identifying significant demand. You are all familiar with the concept of a bilingual district: it is an area, generally a census division (roughly equivalent to an electoral constituency) in which at least 10 per cent of the population is of the minority mother tongue, whether English or French.

For the moment, there are no such districts outside the National Capital Region. But the Act foresees that if and when such districts are proclaimed, federal institutions will have to offer services in both languages within their boundaries. The first Bilingual Districts Advisory Board already recommended to the federal cabinet in March 1971 the creation of 37 bilingual districts across Canada. Meanwhile, the Government has set up a second Advisory Board (chaired by Professor Paul Fox) to review, as the Act requires, the work of the first one in the light of new data from the 1971 census.

I cannot presume upon the second Board's recommendations, but I think that companies wondering where to supply bilingual services would find it helpful to take a serious look at the first Board's conclusions. Thus cities such as Sudbury and Moncton, both proposed as bilingual districts, ought to get immediate attention from major firms doing business there.

In these two cities, numbers alone justify the outlay; in other words, the two language groups are plainly present there in sufficient numbers to justify amply expenditures to respect in practice the legal equality of the two language groups. And there, as elsewhere, any company offering services in both languages demonstrates not only leadership but its sound integration into the surrounding social and cultural context. As for profits, the results can only prove positive: you're not taking away anyone's rights; you're adding to them.

In saying this, I'm not suggesting that bilingual districts are the best, or even a necessary, way of defending language rights. Only after the Fox Commission completes its report can we all make our final judgment as to their value. Meanwhile, to the preoccupied administrator of goodwill who wants to respect language rights but is looking for some rough guidelines, even the earlier Advisory Board's report can help pin-point some of the more obvious areas shared by English- and French-speakers.

Whether we speak of the travelling public, significant demand or bilingual districts, we are dealing mainly with what is called in the jargon of official bilingualism language of service by opposition to language of work. Although the Official Languages Act is almost mute on this latter point, we have interpreted the declaration of intent in section 2 of the Act as meaning equality of status for English and French not only as languages of service but also as languages of work. And Parliament, in passing a Resolution reaffirming the principles of the Official Languages Act in June 1973, has confirmed that this approach was in keeping with the spirit and intent of the Act. But on the language of work question, I regret to say that the Act does not provide the type of information it offers in the case of language of service and which could be passed on to you as useful guidelines for implementing a language of work policy in the private sector.

My purpose, in mentioning language of work, is not to launch into a detailed essay on this question. By now, I am sure you have heard enough about linguistic pettifogging. I would simply say that in any discussion of bilingualism, one should not dissociate language of service from language of work. This is especially true of companies that operate in bilingual or predominantly French-speaking areas of the country. The institutional bilingualism referred to earlier implies not only the provision of services to the public in the latter's preferred official language but also the opportunity for as many employees as possible to work in their preferred language. Through my contacts with the Régie de la langue française in Quebec, I know that many large national corporations doing business in that province have implemented, or started to implement, a policy of French as a useful language of work. I hope that any corporate executives who may not yet have left the room will give a little thought to this by trying, wherever possible, to strengthen French as a language of work in Quebec. This, including a stronger capacity to communicate in French with your French-speaking employees from your Toronto headquarters, seems to me a move that could make your firms not only better corporate Canadians but -- dare one say it? -- even more efficient. For, as the Armed Forces, R.C.M.P. and other

federal agencies will be glad to tell you, letting employees work in their mother tongue not only boosts morale, but allows each employee to think and express himself more quickly and clearly. From the shareholder's as well as the taxpayer's viewpoint, that too makes sense.

There, perhaps in a fairly thin nutshell, are some rather inoffensive, but perhaps necessary, remarks. At a time when social and cultural factors are marking our lives more and more, the Government should not be the only institution to mesh them into its operations. This responsibility falls equally upon the business world, and businessmen, at least in matters of language, might advantageously draw inspiration from the direction mapped out by Parliament.

To help you in this task, the federal government is even willing to offer assistance and guidance through a newly established programme in the Secretary of State's Department. The programme's aim is to encourage and assist business and industry to use the two official languages, first, as languages of service to the public through the promotion of bilingualism in signage and in customer relations, and, secondly, as languages of work where such is necessary and reasonable. Some members here might find it profitable, in terms of ideas only (as everyone knows, the federal government is a little hard up these days) to approach this new office for advice.

There is nothing in this (at least I hope not) to shatter the serenity of any believer in free enterprise. I have tried merely to shed a little light on the Official Languages Act and on its usefulness as a guide, for voluntary application by some businesses, to a sane and realistic language policy.

If I were a psychology prof, which I'm plainly not, I'd be inclined to argue that both English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians too often suffer from a kind of "Plains of Abraham complex" -- a sado-masochistic relationship in which we still think of ourselves as winners or losers, conquerors or conquered. I'm not against a bit of sado-masochism on occasion; but 200 years of it is really rather boring, and no doubt more than we need to be a healthy country, basically at peace with itself.

A few years ago, a well-known professor said something about the State having no business in the bedrooms of the nation. Though not being an economics prof either, I think we might paraphrase that to read for businessmen, in English Canada particularly: historical hangups have no place in the boardrooms of the nation. In business as in love, I believe, trying to understand your partner may not make you like him more; but it might at least help you to distrust him a little more lucidly. Bilingualism, in short, is really rather good for business.